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ABC's Walters Relayed Note for Iran Middleman

Reagan Given Message; Ethics Issue Debated

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ABC News interviewer Barbara Walters, acting "in violation of a literal interpretation" of her network's news policy, transmitted private messages on the Iran arms sales to President Reagan from Iranian arms middleman Manucher Ghorbanifar, ABC and the White House confirmed yesterday.

Walters, according to the White House, passed two documents to Reagan—a typed, unsigned letter and handwritten notes on yellow paper, which appeared to be Walters' version of a discussion she had in December with Ghorbanifar.

The president sent the letter and notes to his White House counsel, who then turned them over to the Tower board investigating the Iran-contra affair, according to White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater.

"I am told that they had nothing new in them in terms of material information that would cast new evidence or light on the case," Fitzwater said. Fitzwater, who said he had not seen the documents, added that the Tower board "didn't even find them [of] enough value to include in their report."

Walters told The Wall Street Journal last week that she "felt terrible" acting as an intermediary for Ghorbanifar. She said that because she thought her information was important, she "made sure it was delivered" to Reagan.

The Journal printed an article yesterday about Walters' role; she could not be reached and an assistant said she was not answering news media inquiries. ABC News issued a statement confirming that Walters passed the documents to the president "believing that her information could be of assistance to the remaining hostages and before informing her management."

At the White House, the episode was viewed as a minor matter and Fitzwater told reporters that "private messages are passed to various people in the White House all the time, so there's certainly nothing unusual about that."

In journalistic circles, however, there were questions about whether Walters had stepped over the line that is supposed to divide the news media and the government.

A number of journalists said they believed that Walters wrongly became a participant in the story she was covering for ABC News.

"We don't have a policy respecting this kind of thing [but] we're in the business of publishing what we know. That's what we surely would have done," said Judith Miller, deputy Washington bureau chief of The New York Times. "We don't deliver messages," added Miller, who covered the Middle East for three years for The Times.

Others recalled that less than 15 years ago, the accepted rules for most newspapers allowed journalists going abroad to be briefed by the Central Intelligence Agency with the understanding that they could be "debriefed" by the CIA on their return.

"The world's most expensive courier," Ed Turner, executive vice president of Cable News Network, said of Walters' action.

ABC News, in a statement issued yesterday, said that after Walters interviewed Ghorbanifar last December along with Saudi businessman Adnan Khashoggi, Ghorbanifar "asked to speak to Ms. Walters again and asked that she send his views to the president."

"ABC News policy expressly limits journalists cooperating with government agencies unless threats to human life are involved," the ABC statement said. "Ms. Walters believed that to be the case. The management of ABC News discussed this matter with Ms. Walters who

understands that the transmission of her information to the president was in violation of a literal interpretation of news policy."

A spokesman for ABC News said that the incident would not jeopardize Walters' position at the network. Walters, who earns more than \$1 million a year, signed a three-year contract with the network last year.